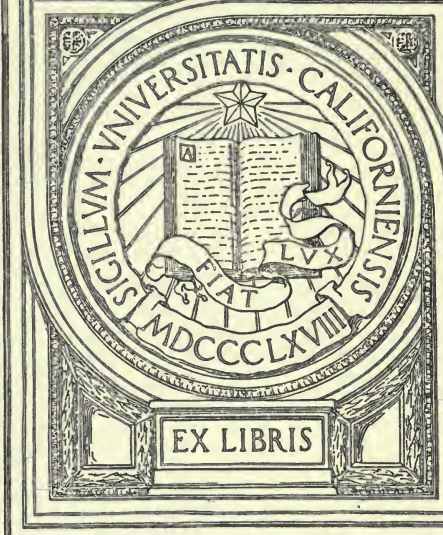
Letters on the Greatness and Simplicity of the Christian Faith

HENRY CHURCHILL KING

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"The possibilities of united prayer are boundless. There is absolutely nothing which can prevail against it. Therefore, with a growing realization of its vital, highly multiplying, and enduring influence, let all, who have at heart the deepest interests of the Kingdom of Christ among students, seek in every way in their power, to make the observance of the coming Universal day of Prayer for Students a great reality."

Feb. 23, 1913.

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LETTERS

ON

THE GREATNESS AND SIMPLICITY OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

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GREATNESS AND SIMPLICITY OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

A REVISED EDITION OF "LETTERS TO SUNDAY-SCHOOL TEACHERS"

BY

HENRY CHURCHILL KING
PRESIDENT OF OBERLIN COLLEGE

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PREFACE

THIS revised edition of these "Letters" is issued under another title, because it has been found that the former title, "Letters to Sunday-School Teachers," gave a wrong impression of the aim of the book, as a possible book of Sunday-school methods. The letters were originally written for *The Pilgrim Teacher*, to help Sunday-school teachers to see for themselves, and to put to their pupils as clearly and simply as possible, the great truths of the Christian faith. But this aim in its essence is one that concerns all thoughtful Christians, and it has accordingly seemed

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best in this edition to eliminate entirely any direct Sunday-school reference. This has involved very slight changes in the text, as the form of familiar letters has been intentionally retained.

HENRY CHURCHILL KING.

OBERLIN COLLEGE, April, 1909.

CONTENTS

LETTER ONE — PAGE

SOME UNDERLYING PRINCIPLES 1

LETTER TWO

THE SEEMING UNREALITY OF THE SPIRITUAL LIFE 17

LETTER THREE

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF JESUS CHRIST . . . 35

LETTER FOUR

GOD MANIFEST IN CHRIST 55

LETTER FIVE

MEN IN THE LIGHT OF CHRIST 67

LETTER SIX

THE CHRISTIAN LIFE AS A FRIENDSHIP . . 81

LETTER SEVEN

THE BASIS IN THE DIVINE FRIENDSHIP . . 97

CONTENTS

LETTER EIGHT

PAGE

THE CONDITIONS OF DEEPENING ACQUAINTANCE WITH GOD 111

LETTER NINE

THE CONDITIONS OF DEEPENING ACQUAINTANCE WITH GOD — *Continued* 127

LETTER TEN

THE CONDITIONS OF DEEPENING ACQUAINTANCE WITH GOD — *Continued* 143

LETTER ELEVEN

THE FUNDAMENTAL TEMPTATIONS . . . 159

LETTER TWELVE

THE SUPREME CLAIMS OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE UPON THOUGHTFUL MEN 177

LETTER I

SOME UNDERLYING PRINCIPLES

Letters on the Greatness and Simplicity of the Christian Faith

Letter One

SOME UNDERLYING PRINCIPLES

I WRITE especially to my younger readers; and I want in these letters simply to try to say to you some of those things that I should like to say if I could sit down with you individually and we were to talk frankly and earnestly of your deeper difficulties, of those questions which, after all, actually concern us more than all else. I am not to aim at saying novel things; but we are to try to find our way together, as I have

repeatedly said to my own Sunday Bible Class, into clear and deep and abiding convictions concerning the great fundamental Christian truths; to see that they are — and I do not choose my words here at random — real, rational, vital. Real — as real as business and housework and books and music and friends and home; rational — as knit up indissolubly with your best thinking in every other sphere; vital — as springing out of your own life, laying commands on life, adding zest to life, and giving great, undying motives for life. You cannot finally be satisfied with less.

If these great fundamental Christian truths come to mean to you what Christ intended they should mean, they will help you to do the two only really great things one

man can do for another: to bring to your associates the contagion of a high and noble life, and to bear honest, effective testimony of your own best vision — that in which and by which you most live. This is a large undertaking; and if it is at the end in any fair measure accomplished, *you must do even more in the matter than I.* You must do some earnest thinking; and, even more than that, you must furnish that deepening experience, through the truth wrought out, that can alone lead you still more deeply into the truth. Simply to replace old phrases by new phrases is poor and futile business enough, and not worth the time of either you or me. And this leads me at once to the first of those preliminary things, those underlying principles, of which I

wanted to speak briefly in this first letter.

1. *No one can simply hand over to you a ready-made creed,* however clear and convincing his reasoning, however just and comprehensive his view, because, in the first place, if your creed is to be worth anything, it must be in truth what we call it, a confession of faith — something in which you can honestly express your own belief; something that grows in some vital way out of your own experience; in a word, a true putting of real convictions. Now convictions cannot be handed over from man to man. No man can ever be sure of absolutely transferring his full thought, even, to another mind; still less can convictions be so easily handed over. The most I can possibly do for any of you is simply to

tell you honestly the truths that mean most to me, the surpassing significance that Christ seems to me to have, and how these deepest things best come home to me. The rest is for you and God. If by time and thought and attention and personal commitment you give God opportunity with you through the truth and through his supreme revelation in Christ, the certainty of God and the truth of God shall be wrought in you. So and only so can come real convictions. It is serious business, therefore, upon which we enter together in these apparently simple letters. The great Christian convictions cannot be simply laid on you like so many garments, or even so many geometrical proofs or scientific propositions. These spiritual convictions are deeply

connected with your inner spirit and life, and they involve your personal relation to God. We greatly degrade Christian doctrine when we regard it as simply a series of more or less provable propositions. Your real inner creed is a vital growth out of your personal experience.

2. *You cannot come in any way into any deep convictions of the truth all at once.* This is not at all to say that there may not be significant crises in your lives. I could even hope that some of these letters might bring such a significant crisis for some of you. But even our deepest and most striking experiences have been long preparing, and their full significance comes out only as we try to live by them. Mighty convictions are no growth of an hour or a day; they root deep in living,

in the influence of close personal associations, in honest putting of the truth into *act*. You will not therefore expect in this most difficult sphere of moral and spiritual convictions, that you can make some happy leap that shall land you at once in the center of all truth. We are coming to believe that no truth, of whatever kind, gets real hold of us so. Even mathematical truths we need to work out in multiplied problems; and for appreciation of scientific truth we require the work in the laboratory. How much more must the appreciation of these vital truths come out only as they are put into act! The creed that is to be deeply yours, you must have *lived out*, not merely thought out. The full significance, therefore, of some of the things I shall say may come to

you only after the months and years have given you the vital experience that unlocks for you the inner secrets of the truth. It is one of the joys of living, that one may look forward to ever-deepening vision of the truth through simple, honest living. "If any man willeth to do his will, he shall know of the teaching." And you are seeking truth, not simply for yourselves, but for the sake of others, so that you need to see that —

3. *No one can witness in the moral and spiritual realm with greatest effectiveness to that which he does not himself believe with depth of conviction.* You cannot kindle another by rote. That which does not greatly move you will scarcely greatly move another through you. This simply means that our effective witness is necessarily confined to what is vitally

real to us — to our real inner creed. For just this reason "complete and systematic" presentation of religious subjects often contains much that is mere filling. Only those parts have any kindling power that have the fire of personal conviction in them. We must learn, as witnesses, not to be afraid of even very fragmentary statements, if that is all we can make real. Even fragments that are real are better than masses that are unreal; but we want the fullest reality possible. For the very sake, therefore, of both the breadth and the effectiveness of one's witness, one must seek to deepen and to extend his convictions; for there is no cheap way to become a good witness to spiritual things. The ultimate aim, then, of this effort we are to make together is absolutely vital to any true success

in the high work of the disciple of Christ. I am to try, with your own cooperation, to help you to real convictions at some points where perhaps now you have none, and to enlarge and to deepen the convictions that are already yours. If even in small degree this could be done, it would be worth all our united efforts.

4. *But this does not mean that we are to seek for each a uniform outcome.* That would be utterly impossible in any case; for even those who thought they perfectly agreed with such statements as I shall make of the great Christian truths would quite certainly not take them in precisely the way I meant them. But even if such absolute uniformity of conviction and statement were possible, it would still be undesirable. For

we seek not the unity of monotonous uniformity, but the organic unity that arises from the truth of each supplementing the truths of all the rest. And, what is more important, the infinite truth of God is too large for any single finite reflection of it. We approximate it, even, only by bringing together the varied individual reflections. We are unique individuals with our own peculiar temperaments and special adaptations, to each of whom, we have the right to believe, it is given to present a kind of personalized and individual setting forth of the great truth of God in Christ, that has its own unique value, which cannot be wholly replaced by any other. I distinctly, therefore, do not seek to reproduce in you my thoughts. Each one of you has his own unique

personality through which God desires to speak in the peculiar voice of that personality; each of you is a member of the body of Christ, and each member has his office. What I hope for my putting to you of Christian truths, therefore, is not that my thought may simply override or replace yours, but rather may quicken and bring out your own individual thinking. I could wish that my thought might be in your minds seeds and germs of truth that in their growth in your minds should reflect the peculiar nature of the mind in which they are planted, and so attain an individual living power of their own. To some extent this is quite certain to be the case; and yet it is worth while to make it clear to ourselves that we seek nothing else, and that the

mechanical uniformity is not even to be desired.

In my next letter I want to speak of some of the reasons why the spiritual life often seems unreal.

LETTER II

THE SEEMING UNREALITY OF THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

Letter Two

THE SEEMING UNREALITY OF THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

I CAN hardly help asking you in this letter to face with me another preliminary question that is of the first importance, before I go on in later letters to take up singly the great Christian truths.

Why do not the facts of the spiritual world seem as real to us as the facts of the material world? Why is the fact of such a God as Christ reveals, and of our relations to him, not as indubitable, for example, as the existence of other persons and our relations to them? In a word, why does the spiritual life often seem so unreal? Why is

the conviction of it a wavering one, with its constant ups and downs? These are questions that press upon us from the start in every thorough-going discussion of the reality of a spiritual view and of a spiritual life. Can something be done now to meet this constant difficulty of the seeming unreality of the spiritual life? Can we see the reason for this seeming unreality?

I have space to speak of only three causes, and of these most briefly. I must ask you to think further than I say. These three causes are: mistaken conceptions of the character of the spiritual life itself; the inevitable fluctuations of our natures; and the intended obscurity required for our moral training.

I. *As to mistaken conceptions.* We

begin with the misconceptions which arise from mistaking the nature of the spiritual life itself, as a life of strain, or a life of imitation or repetition of others' experiences, or a life of magical inheritance, or, finally, a life of rules laid on from without.

1. First, *the spiritual life is not a life of strain*, either in the sense of putting pressure upon the mind to hold certain beliefs, or in the sense of keeping a certain continuous stress of attention. It *is* a real struggle, a continuing conflict, a life of steady facing of duty; but still it should not be, in any hysterical sense, a life of strain.

This means, in the first place, that the man who wishes to have the spiritual life a reality to him will not bring any pressure upon his

mind to hold certain beliefs. He will rather see clearly that his sole responsibility is simply to put himself face to face with the great realities, and to make an honest response to them. Nor, in the second place, does the spiritual life call for the keeping up of a certain stress of feeling or of attention. There is need of clear discrimination at this point. The spiritual life does look, of course, to a persistent, dominant purpose of righteousness, a real surrender of the will to God; but this does not and cannot mean the unchanged continuance of some particular thought or object fixed in the attention, or the steady maintenance of some special state of feeling.

2. It is equally important for us to remember, if the spiritual life is

to be real to us, that *the spiritual life is not a life of the imitation or repetition of the experiences of others.* That we need others here, as elsewhere, is clear. That we come into most that is of value to us through introduction by some other, is also plain. Nevertheless, if the spiritual world is to have the fullest reality for us, the reality it ought to have for a mind awakened to mature self-consciousness, we must have some experience in the spiritual that is genuinely our own, not a hollow echo of something we have heard from others. This is not easy. Men naturally shrink from it. It is far easier to satisfy oneself with a very shallow dealing with the problem of our life, and then to catch up the traditional language of religious experience from others.

3. Again, *the spiritual life is not a life of magical inheritance of results.* If the results in the spiritual life are conceived as coming without clear conditions, in a kind of merely magical way, that life unavoidably takes on for most men to-day a decided aspect of unreality. It has no intelligible connection with the rest of their life, and there seems to be nothing they can do with it. This simply means that we must recognize fully that there are laws and conditions in the spiritual world.

4. On the other hand, *the spiritual life is not a life of rules laid on from without.* Counsels to be heeded there certainly are in the religious life, and valuable habits to be formed. Nevertheless, the heart of the life with God can never be contained in any prescribed routine

of rules and regulations. We are called to a real *life*, with its own spontaneous growth and varied expressions, and we are called to *liberty*. Christ seems to have been concerned not to give rules for holy living or for holy dying, but to trust all to the dynamic of the single motive of love to his person. His disciples are simply asked to be in truth disciples, doing only what loving loyalty to him would suggest.

II. But the sense of unreality passes over upon the spiritual life not only because of mistaken conceptions of it, but also because of *the inevitable fluctuations of our natures*.

1. With all possible care of bodily conditions we cannot preserve an unvarying state of body; and changing *bodily conditions* tinge in-

evitably our mental states. So, too, *the psychical conditions are constantly changing*. And with this constant change, however produced, we have always to reckon. That nothing in life should seem always the same to us, is the inevitable result. We are to expect, therefore, from both physical and psychical conditions, changing vital feelings, alternation of moods, altering power of attention, and some consequent ebb and flow in conviction and in the sense of reality. We are creatures of moods. So long as feeling enters necessarily so much into our sense of the reality of all things, the things of the spirit especially, which do not force themselves upon us, will vary for us in their clearness and reality.

2. But in all this, let it be ob-

served, we have *nothing that is peculiar to the religious life*. It holds for all spheres of value, and, indeed, in every sphere of life where feeling enters at all. This really implies that wherever we are not living a merely fragmentary life, this ebb and tide must be reckoned with; it is involved in our very natures as finite and feeling beings. Moreover, the life of the rejection of all ideals and the life of unbelief have their fluctuations, too. It is not merely the conviction of the highest which varies. The lower life, too, has its inevitable misgivings. We are creatures of two worlds — an animal and a spiritual; and both make themselves felt in some degree. Unbelief has its questionings as well as belief. We may not choose whether our feeling shall

vary or not. We can only choose the dominant moods.

3. This leads us to emphasize the important principle that when we find fluctuations in our convictions concerning the reality of anything, we must ask for *the witness of our consciously best hours*, physically, intellectually, and morally. If religious conviction does tend to go up and down with our moral attitude, and the ethical has any real justification, then our religious convictions are just so far confirmed. And with reference to the entire man, it behooves us to ask, When does the spiritual world seem most real to us? in our best or our worst moments? when we are consciously most in possession of ourselves in every way, or when we are consciously below our best? So Tyn-

dall, for example, tested the doctrine of material atheism: "I have noticed," he said, "during years of self-observation, that it is not in the hours of clearness and vigor that this doctrine commends itself to my mind." We need, thus, constantly to take account of our necessary finite limitations and the inevitable fluctuations of our life, if we are to keep our religious faith clear and strong.

The very fact that these causes of the sense of the unreality of the spiritual life are to be found in our natural constitution suggests that it may not be intended that the spiritual life should always seem to us real and commanding. And if we press the inquiry, Why should this be intended? it seems possible to suggest but one answer consonant

with a genuine religious faith: it must be needed as a part of our moral training. We are brought, thus, to consider the last of the causes of the seeming unreality of the spiritual life.

III. *The seeming unreality is a part of our moral training.* For the sake, then, of our moral training, for the sake of deepening the spiritual life itself, into which the moral is so inextricably woven, there is a purposed seeming unreality in spiritual things. If there is a God at all who really means to bring us into the highest life, we may confidently expect that the conditions of our life will be so shaped as to call out in us the persistent ethical will.

1. Above all else, this means that the conditions must be such that the religious life must be a man's own,

voluntarily chosen and voluntarily kept. If this is to be true, a *sacred reverence for the human personality must be a controlling principle in all God's dealing with us.* This implies that, in the nature of the case, it is impossible that there should be any forcing of God and the spiritual life upon a man.

2. And if there is to be no forcing of God and the spiritual world upon a man, this would mean, further, that we can expect *no absolutely incontrovertible evidences*, no overpowering signs. A choice will be left, some room for our own attitude of will to have its effect.

3. But even more than this is to be said. Our moral need seems plainly to require, also, that there shall be *no domination of the human personality by God's personality.* Not

only will God not thrust the fact of his existence upon us in resistless fashion, but in his personal relation to us, even after we have voluntarily and gladly recognized it, he will still sacredly respect our own moral initiative and our own individuality. The very possibility of unmistakably genuine character in finite beings seems to depend upon the fact that God should thus, in at least the preliminary stages of their training, scrupulously remain the indemonstrable, the invisible, the hidden, the unobtrusive God, showing such a reverence for the personality of his children as men never show for one another. We may expect, then, that God's relation to us will be an *unobtrusive* one.

These, then, seem to me to be some of the chief reasons for the

seeming unreality of the spiritual life that we needed to consider if we were to have the way cleared for a positive putting of the great Christian truths. I fear that I have made rather severe demands upon your attention in this letter; but I trust the considerations urged may be seen to mean more and more to you, as the years go on.

LETTER III

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF JESUS CHRIST

Letter Three

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF JESUS CHRIST

YOU count yourselves, first and foremost, disciples of Jesus Christ, and the supreme aim of your Christian witness is to bring others into the same discipleship. This must mean, if either your living or your witnessing is undertaken with full thoughtfulness, that you call yourselves Christians and have become witnesses to the Christian faith because you believe that he from whom you take your name is the most significant person of history. You believe that Christ's life and teaching have more light than any other fact of history to

throw upon God, upon man, upon all the varied relations of God and man, and so upon the practical problem of daily living in its deepest aspects. That is, you see God, men, and all of life through Christ.

The first step, therefore, toward fundamental Christian truth must be some understanding of Christ himself. I am to ask you, therefore, to consider with me in this letter the very basis of our Christian faith. Who is Jesus Christ? What does he mean? How does he reveal God? What right have we to give him so supreme a place in the mastery of our thinking and living? And I can only answer these questions by telling you what Jesus Christ seems to me to mean, and so giving you a kind of personal confession of my own faith in him. In doing

this, I can hardly avoid repeating in substance what I have elsewhere said on this most fundamental of all Christian themes. Each point deserves much more elaboration than I can give it in this brief letter. Try to *think* each out fully for yourselves.

1. First, then, *Christ seems to me to be the greatest in the greatest sphere, that of the moral and spiritual.* It is hardly too much to say that this place is given him by the common consensus of all thoughtful men who really know his spirit and teaching. He sees the problem of living more broadly and more deeply than any other. No other has so grasped the full meaning of life. No other shows such delicate skill in applying moral and spiritual principles. If we have anywhere one who may be said to speak with full authority in

the moral and spiritual world, that person, assuredly, is Jesus Christ.

It is perhaps only to put the same thing in different form, when one says with Fairbairn that Christ is *transcendent among founders of religion*, "and to be transcendent here is to be transcendent everywhere, for religion is the supreme factor in the organizing and regulating of our personal and collective life." Try to make clear to yourselves how tremendous and all-permeating the influence of a founder of a religion is. He makes the very light and atmosphere in which thousands, and perhaps millions, of his fellow beings see the whole of their life. And among these transcendent leaders of the race, Jesus himself is transcendent. The last forty years have been characterized by such a

study of the religions of the world as has never been seen before. And yet it seems to me hardly open to doubt that the result of this study is not to make the figure of Christ less, but more significant. At the most, we can hardly do more than bring any other religious teacher into comparison with Christ at certain points. No religious founder will bear comparison with him in the full scope of either his life or his teaching.

So really is Christ greatest in this sphere of the moral and spiritual that he becomes for men truly a kind of "personalized conscience." One may well be challenged to suggest a higher moral test for a man than that which is afforded by the spirit of Jesus, as concretely shown in his life and teaching.

2. *Jesus is also the sinless and non-penitent one.* No other, certainly, ever intelligently claimed to be sinless; for no other has the claim ever been intelligently made. The great historian, von Ranke, carries the common judgment of men with him when he says: "More guiltless and more powerful, more exalted and more holy, has naught ever been on earth than his conduct, his life, and his death; the human race knows nothing that could be brought, even afar off, in comparison with it." If Christ's unusual moral insight is granted at all, if he were not sinless, he could neither make the claim nor allow the claim to be made. The keener his moral consciousness, the less likely was he to make any claim that was not true. But in one of the surest of all the bits of autobi-

ography that we have from Christ, he tells the story of his own struggle with the most fundamental temptations of his life without the slightest hint of moral failure.

And the claim of the sinlessness of Christ, it should be noted, is not made so much because of any special statements, as because of the fact of what Dr. Bushnell has called his "impenitent piety," which seems to lie upon the very surface of the records. There is no indication anywhere that he includes himself with others in the confession of sin. He does not count himself thus with other men as needing redemption, but as himself clearly able to redeem them. And by this fact of non-penitence he is marked off definitely from all good men. In the face of it he cannot simply be called the

best of good men. In the case of all other good men, as they go forward in the life of righteousness with growing ideals, their own consciousness of failure becomes also more clear. Let one contrast, for example, the spirit of Jesus here with that of perhaps the best of all his followers — whom many seem willing to make a spiritual authority side by side with Christ — the apostle Paul. The sense of sin and of debt to Christ for deliverance from sin are both most marked in him, and there seems to be in his latest letters even an increasing sense of his sin in his early rejection of Christ. The fact that Christ is "the only religious character that disowns repentance" is justly to be regarded as an absolutely unique phenomenon among men of real moral consciousness.

3. *With the highest of all ideals, Christ consciously rises to that ideal, and "compels us to admit that he rises to it."* Christ's ideal involves absolute trust in God, and the spirit of absolute love toward God and men. And it is to the full measure of this ideal that he consciously rises. It would be much that men should be compelled to admit that a man rose to the full measure of any reasonable ideal. But that one who sees more clearly than any other in the moral and spiritual realm, and cherishes the highest ideal that it is possible for a man to cherish, should consciously rise to that ideal, and compel us to admit that he so rises to it, is a fact unparalleled in the history of the world. This is far more than mere sinlessness. It bears witness to a positiveness of moral achieve-

ment that dwarfs all other human attainment.

4. *Jesus has such a character that we can transfer it feature by feature to God, without any sense of blasphemy and without any sense of lack.* I am not now raising with you any metaphysical theory of the person of Christ. I only ask you to notice that the most enlightened nations of the world to-day owe their ideal of God to Jesus Christ, — not merely to what he said, but to what he was. The significant thing is that there has been one among us men, the circumstances of whose life we in large measure know, concerning whose character we can say, That is what I mean by the character of God. One may well ask himself what he could add to the character of God in imagination which has not

already been set forth, not merely in the words of Jesus, but in his actual concrete life. Fairbairn is fully justified in saying that Jesus is "the first being who had realized for man the idea of the Divine." What language can compass such a fact as that?

5. *Jesus is consciously able to redeem all men.* This, too, seems to me to lie upon the very face of the record. If there is one thing that we can be sure of concerning the religion of Jesus, it is that it claimed to be a religion of redemption. And one is to remember that it is this man who knew as no other did the meaning of sin and of moral conduct, and the meaning of sharing the life of God, who could believe not only that he himself was right in his relation to God, but was able to redeem all others to God. The

Gospel records certainly make it clear, in the words of another, that "Jesus knows no more sacred task than to point men to his own person." He himself is the way to God, the very life of God — consciously able to redeem all men.

6. This seems to me to mean, as Dr. Denison suggests, that *Jesus has such God-consciousness and such sense of mission as would topple any other brain into insanity, but only keeps him sweet, normal, rational.* It is very difficult for any of us to get a sense of being especially necessary to the kingdom of God without serious danger of moral lapse in overweening conceit or hysterical strain. And there is no suffering that men know comparable with the suffering that, for example, a father has in the sin and shame of his son. A very

little of such suffering is all that it seems possible for a man to bear. But here is one who can believe as to all other men that they best see God as they see him, and that it is his to bear the sin of all and to redeem all. And still, under this immeasurable God-consciousness and sense of mission, he can be so sane and normal and rational that we may contrast in these respects the atmosphere of the Gospels with that of even our best religious books. In the very act of the most stupendous self-assertion, he can still declare himself to be preeminently the meek and lowly one, and can carry our conviction both of his meekness and of his power to give rest to all. For my own part, I cannot see that the world offers anywhere a comparable phenomenon.

7. *Jesus is the only person who can call out absolute trust.* And yet, if we are to have the spirit of little children, as Herrmann says, "we must meet with a personal life which compels us to trust it without reserve." And he is surely justified in adding, "Only the person of Jesus can arouse such trust in a man who has awakened to moral self-consciousness." We know no other person in history into whose hands we should feel that we could safely put ourselves absolutely without reserve. The New Testament bears vivid witness to the trust Christ called out, in its glorious transformation of the hard and forbidding words "master" and "slave."

8. *Jesus is the one person of history in whom God certainly finds us and we find God.* Here, too, I raise no

question of any metaphysical theory. I only say that it seems to me that we have in Jesus a fact so great that we can turn to it with assurance, as able to bring the conviction of the existence and love of God. As one turns confidently to the greatest he has known in art and literature and music to find again the refreshment he has before found, so the Christian returns confidently to Christ to find the indubitable assurance of God. "In Christ," as another has said, "God turns to the Christian and is accessible to him." Harnack's words upon just this point have always seemed to me to have a note of personal confession of faith: "When God and everything that is sacred threaten to disappear in darkness, or our doom is pronounced; when the mighty forces of inex-

orable nature seem to overwhelm us, and the bounds of good and evil to dissolve; when, weak and weary, we despair of finding God at all in this dismal world — it is then that the personality of Christ may save us."

9. And all this means that *Jesus is the ideal* realized. The statement may seem commonplace, but the fact is not. Speaking philosophically, we should have a right to expect the realized ideal only in the absolute whole of things. And, as a matter of fact, we seem to find no realized ideals in the lower spheres. It is all the more remarkable, therefore, that in this highest sphere of all, the sphere of the moral and spiritual, we should seem to find our fully realized ideal. Ask yourselves, as I have often asked myself, what

you would add to Christ that is not in his life, or what you would take away from Christ that would make you more sure that God was in him, spoke and wrought through him, that he was in very truth the supreme manifestation of the living God.

If only a tithe of what I have said were true, surely here in Christ is the supreme fact in history, the one priceless fact of the world. We may well name ourselves after him, and account him above all. All other values, of literature and music and art and friendship, go back finally to the riches of some personal life. Here in Christ are the unsearchable riches of the one unfathomable life. The one great, all-inclusive, indispensable need of men, then, is to know him; and

the one supreme wisdom is to give this greatest of all persons his full opportunity with us. We have no need to try to *force* our minds to any conviction concerning him. We have need only to put ourselves steadfastly, attentively, and obediently in his presence, to let him make his own legitimate impression, — bring his own conviction.

LETTER IV

GOD MANIFEST IN CHRIST

Letter Four

GOD MANIFEST IN CHRIST

IF Christ has at all the significance which my last letter indicated, then he is able to put us at once in the very midst of the spiritual world and in touch with God himself. He becomes the master-key to all our deepest moral and spiritual problems, and God himself becomes manifest to us in him. We find God in Christ. And in our search for God we have a right to start directly from Christ as undoubtedly the most significant of the facts of the world, because the surest discerner of moral and spiritual truth, consciously the completest revealer

of God, and carrying most decisively the judgment of our own reason and conscience at their best.

Even in the matter of an intellectual argument for God, we are thoroughly justified in starting immediately from the fact of Christ himself, — his life, his teachings, and especially his consciousness, — as the greatest and most significant fact in the world, and so our best proof of the existence of God in the full Christian sense. The argument goes upon the simple assumption that if we are ever to discern the real nature of the ultimate world-ground, our best light must come from the greatest and most significant facts. For myself, for the reasons that I have indicated in the previous letter, I have no doubt that Christ is the most significant of all

facts known to us, and therefore the best basis for direct and decisive inference as to the nature of the world-ground. The argument does not at all go, it should be noticed, upon any assumption of the arbitrary authority of Jesus, but simply upon the significance of what he is. Any authority which we may subsequently give to him is based wholly upon what we have in fact found him to be. I know no good reason, therefore, why one should not count the fact of Christ as the greatest of all proofs of a completely satisfying God, — personal, and of inexhaustible power and wisdom and love; the proof most powerful to produce conviction in the mind of a man who has come to full moral self-consciousness. The great difficulty with practically all the common

proofs for the existence of God is that they do not bring us to anything like God in the full Christian sense in which Christ reveals him.

But when we speak of God as manifested in Christ, we mean much more than that Christ can be taken simply as the most hopeful datum for a new argument for the existence and attributes of God. No merely intellectual argument of any kind can put us into personal relation with God, and only this brings a man really into the religious life.

If, therefore, we are to be Christians in truth, we must find in Christ much more than the beginning of an intellectual argument for God. And, as we have seen, we count ourselves first and foremost his disciples because we believe not

only that he is the greatest teacher, and lived the most perfect life, but because we believe him a personality so great that one has only to put himself persistently in his presence to find God a real and present fact, a living personality in vital touch with our own personal life.

In the deeply significant words of another: "This thought, that when the historical Christ takes such hold of us, we have to do with God himself — this thought is certainly the most important element in the confession of the Deity of Christ for any one whom he has redeemed. We do not reach this thought by way of a logical conclusion from that which we have experienced at the hands of Christ, but the experience itself is such that when we confess his Deity, we

simply give him his right name. When we understand his Person, we grasp the expression God gives us of his feeling toward us, or God himself as a Personal Spirit working upon us. In Christ God turns to the Christian and is accessible to him." Luther expresses most strongly this great Christian confession of God manifested in Christ: "This is the first principle and most excellent article, how Christ is in the Father: that we are able to have no doubt that whatsoever that man says and does is counted and must be counted said and done in heaven, for all angels; in the world, for all rulers; in hell, for all devils; in the heart, for every evil conscience and all secret thoughts. For if we are certain of this: that what he thinks, speaks, and wills the

Father also wills, then I can defy all that may fight and rage at me. For here in Christ I have the Father's heart and will." And in this great confession of Christ men may unite who may differ widely in metaphysical theories.

Jesus, that is, does much more than to *teach* us that God is Father; he so reveals the very spirit and love of God in his life that he *enables us to believe* that God is Father, enables us to trust ourselves absolutely to his forgiving love and his strengthening grace, and so brings us into our true position as children of God. In Christ, thus, in his living personality, the Christian finds God himself manifested as nowhere else, and finds, therefore, for himself, the way to life. Jesus has become for him in very deed the

way to God, the truth of God, the very life of God.

It is not strange, then, that the New Testament comes to sum up its great primitive confession in the baptismal and benediction formulas, which affirm a God who is in his very nature Father, living love; who is manifested in the living, concrete personality of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Master; and who, in loving care for his individual children, makes himself known through the great manifestation in Christ by his Spirit in each individual heart. Christianity becomes, thus, what Fairbairn calls it, a "priestless religion"; for every disciple of Jesus has himself become, through this vision of the heart of Christ, prophet, priest, and king, — seer of the supreme vision of God himself,

in direct communion with God, and with the promise of complete spiritual conquest.

This is the great goal of the Christian's witness to Christ, — to bring men really to see God manifest in Christ.

LETTER V

MEN IN THE LIGHT OF CHRIST

Letter Five

MEN IN THE LIGHT OF CHRIST

IN our last letter we saw that we were able to believe in God as Father because of his supreme manifestation in Jesus Christ, because we were able to think of the spirit of Christ's life as truly representing the spirit of God, and so could believe that the very life of God was a life of self-giving love. This is the revelation of God which Christ gives, both in his living and in his teaching.

And Christ is plainly certain that this life of God must be regarded as the one source of life and light and blessing for all men. God's life

must be the standard, therefore, not alone of character, but also of happiness. And it is into the sharing of that life of God that Christ desires to bring all. *This thought of God as Father, as living, self-giving love, determines now all else in the thought of Christ.* It determines not only his conception of God, but his conception, also, of men, of the world, of life, and of all the future. I am to ask you to see, in this letter, what this thought of God as Father, manifested in Christ, means in our conception of men. *How must we think of men when we see them in the light of Christ?*

Because Christ knows God as Father, he inevitably sees *men as the children of God:* on the one hand, in the purpose and desire of God, akin to God and with unmeasured possi-

bilities; on the other hand, so far as they are disobedient children of God, Christ sees men in their sin and deep need.

First, then, Christ cannot believe that God is the really loving Father, and that his life is the only true life, and not see at once that *men can come into a significant life only so far as they are able to enter into God's own life of love*. And it is to this, Christ is sure that God has appointed men. While, then, we still cherish the unloving, the unforgiving spirit, we are irrevocably shut out from God's life. Even in a great human love of a noble man, the relation is inevitably hindered when we allow ourselves consciously to fall below the spirit of the nobler life. So, still more, in our relation with God, must the harbored evil build a wall of separa-

tion. In the purpose of God, therefore, Christ sees men as really *akin to the heavenly Father*, having a personality like the Father's, and capable, in their free choice, of living in loving personal relations with both God and men. Christ believes in men, in the greatness conferred by God upon them, and in their divine possibilities. In the thought of Christ, thus, no limits can be set to man's growth in knowledge, in power, in character, in the ongoing of his sharing in the life of God, and thus in his coming increasingly into just such ethical and spiritual relations to God as those in which Christ stood.

And that men are children of God means, further, to Christ, that every man, though he may be in the wrong, is still a child of the heav-

enly Father, *loved of God*, grieved over, longed for, sought out.

Once more, because God is Father, and his life of love is the one true life, that men should be children of God means, also, that they must be *brothers one of another*. If I am to love men, I need to believe that the life of every man is knit up indissolubly with my own, that he is like me, and that he is in very truth a child of God. Then I cannot wish to kill or hate or despise or condemn him.

That men are my brothers means, then, in the first place, that *our lives are indissolubly knit up together*. For, to mention no other consideration, for your own life, according to Christ's fundamental principle, you need most of all to love. And to refuse to love, to refuse to pour

out your life into the life of others, is to doom yourself to the dreadful loneliness and fruitlessness of the selfish life. To real enlargement of life there is one sole way — through the giving of ourselves in loving self-sacrifice to others. He who refuses to take this way only "tightens his chains in struggling to be free." × Orville Dewey is but following out Christ's own teaching when he says: "Every relation to mankind, of hate or scorn or neglect, is full of vexation and torment. There is nothing to do with men but to love them; to contemplate their virtues with admiration, their faults with pity and forbearance, and their injuries with forgiveness. Task all the ingenuity of your mind to devise some other thing, but you can never find it. To hate your adver-

Mk 6:27

× Unitarian — 1794–1882

sary will not help you; to kill him will not help you; there is nothing within the compass of the universe can help you, but to love him."

And that men are our brothers means, also, that whether we will or not, they are *really very like us*. We may strive to put them in quite another class, and yet, if we will be honest, we are constrained to admit that they are, nevertheless, in the great essentials, just like us, made with the same faculties, the same fundamental doubleness of nature, the same variableness, the same great possibilities, and the same great universal interests; and these respects which are common to us all are, after all, greater than those which divide class from class.

This vision of men as children of God even in their disobedience, and

as brothers one of another in their necessary recognition of their likeness and of the indissoluble way in which their lives are knit together, Christ never loses. Because he knows that the only true life is the life of the heavenly Father, which is the life of love, he must believe that the Father has made all men capable of this life, and desires that into it they all should be brought. Even in their sin and need, therefore, Christ sees men still as children away from the Father's house and from his life of love, and *therefore* in darkness, in loneliness, in emptiness and misery and want, and in sin against the Father's love. For them there can be no way back into light and friendship and largeness and richness of life, and righteousness, but the way back to the

Father's house, into the sharing of his own life of love.

And Christ knows so fully the inexorableness of this demand for love as the one source of life, that he knows that *the whole spiritual life is a unity*, that no part of the life of men can go up or down alone, that it is all of a piece, that good or evil cherished anywhere tends to permeate the whole. From Christ's point of view, therefore, whatever the wrong another has done me, still suspicion and contempt and hate are the very working of death in me. And for my own life's sake, I must throw them off. On the other hand, every bit of true love counts.

It is, then, just because Christ sees so clearly that love is life and hate is death, that he must insist so strenuously upon *the most radical carrying*

through of the loving spirit. He knows, therefore, that the commands of the loving Father are laid on us in love, and that we come into life and blessing, not in the proportion in which we evade these commands of the Father, but rather in just the proportion in which we may radically carry them through to the completest fulfilment. It is, therefore, not because Christ desires to lay upon us a harder law, that he gives such deep, inner interpretation of the law of righteousness in the Sermon on the Mount, but only because of his consuming passion to bring us into the fullest life.

The sin of men, thus, from Christ's point of view, can only be seen in its true depth and ugliness and deadliness when we set it over against the love of God and the

longing of the heavenly Father for every son of man. Both the greatness and the sin of men, therefore, are to be seen only in the light of the supreme revelation of God in Christ himself. And when we thus see men as they are in Christ's ideal, and as they are in their estrangement from God, we see, at the same time, the true and the false life.

And so we have, as I understand it, Christ's doctrine of man, of sin, and of righteousness. It all grows directly out of the thought of God as Father. The great essentials of Christ's thought here you can make plain even to a child; but its significance deepens with every year of growth.

LETTER VI

THE CHRISTIAN LIFE AS A FRIENDSHIP

Letter Six

THE CHRISTIAN LIFE AS A FRIENDSHIP

WHEN Christ makes the sum of his gospel the revelation of God as Father, when he sums up all life in the one great commandment of love to God and to men, when he makes the supreme test of the judgment to lie in a ministering love, — in all these statements alike he seems to be declaring that the life of the disciple of Christ is simply a life of friendship. It seems to me sometimes that it is because of the very simplicity of Christ's message that it escapes us. We admit it all as though it were

a matter of course, and still fail to draw the first inferences from it.

And yet, in very truth the Christian life is a friendship — with God, with men. *The problem of life is the problem of friendship.* This is to be deliberately, even philosophically, said. For persons are the most certain of facts, the most important of facts, and the most permanent of facts.

Persons are the most certain of facts. In all our life no fact is so certain as the existence of persons. Many philosophies have questioned the reality of the external world of matter, but no philosophy has ever seriously questioned the existence of persons.

Persons, too, are for us the most important facts, because in our relations to them we find the greatest

sources both of happiness and of character. We live in these personal relations. It is our friends who reveal us to ourselves; our friends who, in Emerson's phrase, "make us do what we can."

And persons are not less certainly the most abiding facts. Only a friendship can be eternal. "Love never faileth." "The world passeth away, . . . but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever." Rightly to fulfil these personal relations, human and divine, in the midst of which we are placed, that is, simply to be a good friend, is the sum of all. For love is the central virtue, all-embracing. As Paul argues, "Love worketh no ill to his neighbor: love therefore is the fulfilment of the law." The conception, consequently, of that

denomination whom others call Quakers, but who call themselves "Friends," is close to the very center of the gospel. Christ calls his disciples to live the life of obedient children of God, and of brothers one of another, — to have and to show increasingly the simply friendly spirit.

And the New Testament everywhere conceives the relation in which the disciple stands to God as an individual, intimate, constant, and unobtrusive personal relation of the Spirit of God to the man's spirit. Other figures of speech are used in setting forth this relation; but the dominant conception throughout the New Testament is personal. We have a clear right, therefore, to affirm that from the point of view of Christ's own teaching, and of

the New Testament generally, the Christian life is to be conceived as a personal relation of friendship with God on the one hand, and with our fellow men on the other. When, then, you are trying to bring others into the Christian life, you are seeking to introduce them into a life even so simple as this. You are only trying to persuade them to be good friends, obedient children of the heavenly Father, true brothers one of another. "Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is begotten of God, and knoweth God."

Let me ask you to think with me, then, for a moment of the significance of this simple conception of the Christian life, and to note the light which it throws on *the knowl-*

edge of God, on *the unity of life*, and on *our relations to others*.

I. And, first, how am I to find God? "This is life eternal," John makes Jesus say, "that they should know thee the only true God, and him whom thou didst send, even Jesus Christ." This conception, that my relation to God is primarily that of a personal friendship, makes impossible a merely creedal, or technically religious conception of that relation. We need, no doubt, to know many things about God; but knowledge *about* God is not the same thing as that acquaintance *with* God which Jesus evidently has in mind. It is quite possible, in this sense, to be Christian in head and pagan in heart; to have learned much of theology, and yet to be sadly clear that one stands in no close relation

to God himself. It is not primarily by the searching of the intellect that we find our way to God. Nor is it primarily even by religious exercises that we draw near to God. I should wish to be very far from underestimating the value of either prayer or Bible study; on the contrary, I believe them of vital importance. But Christ gave few directions for either. And he made it very clear that no man was prepared to pray, who was not willing to have the forgiving and the loving spirit. Not primarily, then, by the searching of the intellect, and not primarily by way of religious exercises, but by catching, in the presence of Christ, his own spirit of love, are we prepared to find in him the supreme revelation of God.

Only love can believe in love other

than sentimentally. And it was those who had ministered in the loving spirit, who, Christ showed, had done it even unto him. No argument or demonstration, no ecstatic visions of Christ, no religious experiences, no prophesying in his name, can take the place of the loving spirit. The cup of cold water given in the name of the disciple is itself a direct road, Christ assures us, to the vision of the manifestation of God in him. Just so we find him. But we are often not really willing to take this lowly, simple way to God. We want to make great demonstrations and learned arguments, and feel the thrill of marvelous religious experiences with magical changes. And yet it is still true that "every one that loveth is begotten of God, and knoweth God."

II. And this conception of the Christian life as friendship brings, also, *wonderful unity into life*. If the spirit that is required of us in relation both to God and to men is essentially the same spirit, then all our life is wonderfully simplified and unified. The first and the second great commandments are bound up together. God's lessons are close at hand. Every human relationship becomes, thus, a teacher of God. We are helped into a true love of God in the proportion in which we are most faithfully fulfilling the common relations of our daily life. To be a good son, a good brother, a good husband, a good father, a good friend, — all this directly helps into right relations to God. What it means to call God "Father," and to think of

ourselves as his "children," and to say that he "loves" us, we must largely learn in the very midst of our human relationships. Every genuine love is, thus, both an *evidence* of the divine love and a *preparation* for it. The old ascetic and monkish idea, therefore, that we were peculiarly drawing near to God as we withdrew from human relationships, is found to be necessarily out of harmony with Christ's fundamental conception. If the true life is the life of love, we must learn it not apart from men, but among them. We draw near to God as we draw near to men.

III. This simple conception of the Christian life as a friendship has also its *light to throw upon our relations to others*. For it emphasizes, on the one hand, the duty of

enlarging the circle of our friends, and, on the other hand, the duty of deepening our friendships. Obviously, if in Christ's thought the world's goal is the civilization of brotherly men, his disciples must more and more and everywhere prove themselves friends. Important as it is that one should be faithful to what we call our specific religious duties to other men, Christ's own judgment test makes it clear that the great question of the judgment will be, not, With how many have you spoken concerning their souls? but, With how many have you earned the right to speak of the things that lie deepest and are most sacred to them? With how many have you shown yourself truly friendly? How many know that you love them? "Inas-

much as ye did it unto one of these my brethren, even these least, ye did it unto me."

And if the Christian life is fundamentally friendship, and implies not only the duty of steadily enlarging the circle of our friends, but also the duty of deepening our friendships, one may well confront himself again and again with the questions, How deep and sacred a thing is friendship to you? How large and rich a self are you giving to your friends? Have you any friendship that could easily be conceived as a type of the perfect life in God? How far are you achieving the highest in friendship? In some measure, surely, that ought to be true of every disciple of Christ which Baron Bunsen said of his wife, as, dying, he looked up into

her face, "In thy face I have seen the face of the Eternal." And our highest service to our friends in seeking to bring them into the eternal life lies in this, that they should catch some glimpses of God through our lives.

LETTER VII

THE BASIS IN THE DIVINE FRIENDSHIP

Letter Seven

THE BASIS IN THE DIVINE FRIENDSHIP

IN my last letter I asked you to see that, in entire harmony with Christ's own thought and the deepest trend of the New Testament writings, we could best conceive of the Christian life as simply a friendship — with God, with men. If this is a true conception, then the very beginning of the life with God, of communion with him, is our entrance upon this divine friendship, which necessarily involves, at the same time, a life of love toward men. The conditions of a deepening spiritual life, the conditions

of all growth in the Christian life, are simply the conditions of a deepening friendship with God and men. And these conditions are essentially the same for our relation with God as for our relation with men. We may think of our religious life as simply a deepening acquaintance with God, and may ask at once what the conditions are upon which that friendship with God may deepen.

Let us ask, then, what the basis is in any true friendship. If God is a person, and we are persons and our relation to him is consequently first of all a personal relation, then the basis of our personal relation with him must be that of any true friendship. And it is because I hope that you who read will find this conception helpful not

only in your own lives, but especially helpful in presenting the Christian life to your friends, that I am asking you to note with me that the facts which must lie at the basis of every friendship worthy of the name are exactly those facts that have to be considered in laying the foundation of any genuine Christian life.

Now the foundation of all high friendship, whether with God or with men, so far as I can see, must be threefold: mutual self-revelation and answering trust, mutual self-surrender, and some deep community of interests.

I. And, first, at the basis of every friendship, human and divine, must lie *mutual self-revelation and answering trust.* All deepening of personal relations involves such in-

creasing revelation on the part of each of the friends, and an answering trust as well on the part of each. The terms "revelation" and "trust," therefore, that we sometimes think of as peculiarly religious, are in truth not peculiar to religion at all, but necessarily involved in every true friendship. If a friendship is to grow, one cannot always be "on probation." "Perfect love casteth out fear." Self-revelation and answering trust assume, of course, association. In our relation to God, it assumes, above all, our staying in the presence of Christ in the Word.

And the trust that must underlie our friendship with God, as our friendship with men, must be a trust both in the character and in the love of the other. One does

not need to make terms with a real friend. He can trust his friend out of his sight. Now God has meant to make the greatest possible proof both of his character and of his love in his revelation in Christ. He asks for no trust without evidence. He might rather ask, Have I not given you reason to trust my love? What more can or would you ask than I have already made plain in Christ? Growing revelation, too, calls out growing trust, as also growing trust calls out growing revelation. The friendship deepens at every point with the growth of this double basis.

It is no mystery, then, that faith is so prominent a word in Christianity, because we have in Christ the greatest of all self-revelations of the greatest person, calling out,

therefore, the supreme faith. Moreover, there is a special reason why, in our relation to God, we must walk by faith. If there is danger in any friendship that the stronger personality may override the life of his friend, the danger is still greater in our relation with God. His relation to us must not be an obtrusive one. We need the invisible God. If we are at all to make choices that are our own, we must walk here by faith, not by sight.

And it is not more true that God asks our trust than that he also trusts us. How priceless are the interests that he has committed to us in his kingdom, and how certainly does the freedom from mere rules in the religion of Christ show his willingness to rest all on our loyal love to him!

II. But in the basis of any true friendship there must be, also, *mutual self-surrender*. Perhaps the best definition of love that we know is the giving of the self. It is not things, nor any certain kind of treatment that we ask from our friends, but themselves. This giving of the self presupposes, of course, trust. One cannot absolutely submit without absolute trust. And the depth of the friendship depends upon the completeness with which the self is given; the significance of the friendship, upon the richness of the self given. One can almost range his friendships, upon careful thought, in an ascending scale, depending upon the extent to which he gives himself in them. And the duty of growth connects itself at once with the fact that in our

friendships we can ultimately give nothing but ourselves. If, therefore, we are to have much here to give, we must take pains to fulfil the conditions of our own growth.

One who has once wakened up to the significance of a high friendship certainly understands that such a friendship is not, as one has said, "a weakening denial of self, but a strengthening affirmation of self," that every such added friendship is an enlargement of life. When, then, we try to think of this self-giving as applied to our relation to God, we see at once that the demand for a surrender of ourselves is *no demand peculiar to God, and no demand arbitrary in God.* In demanding such giving of ourselves, God makes the same kind of demand that we make on one another.

And it is just as certain that the demand is not an arbitrary one. God must ask that we shall give ourselves completely to him, if he is to give himself completely to us. It is passing strange that the terms "self-surrender," "self-giving," "complete consecration," have so hard and different a sound in religion than in other relations. We see the facts as they are only when we see that these terms stated in the relation to God, even as in relation to man, are simply the inevitable, glad condition upon which alone the best in friendship may come to us.

There seem to me, sometimes, to be two opposite instincts in man, — self-devotion and the insatiate thirst for love. And it is the great, unique contribution of religion, that it

introduces us to that one relation in which both these instincts can be absolutely unchecked and completely satisfied. In every human relation, even the closest and dearest, there are many limitations. In much we must all live alone. There is only one relation in which we can give ourselves unstintedly, only one which is wholly satisfying.

III. The two fundamental elements in every friendship, and so in our friendship with God, already noted — mutual self-revelation and answering trust, and mutual self-surrender — both point forward to the need of *some deep community of interests* in the highest friendship. It is not necessary that one's closest friends should agree with him in his whims and fancies and hobbies or even in his occupations. But it is

necessary that there should be agreement as to the great abiding aims and ideals and purposes. No friendship can be all it ought to be in which there is not sympathy in the highest moments. If one is conscious that when he is really at his best he is obliged to leave his friends outside, as not able to understand or enter into this best, then he knows the pain of finding that his highest self awakens no response in his closest friends. In the greatest friendships one must be able to say to his friend, The interests which are supreme to you shall be supreme to me. Not less than this, certainly, must we be able to say to God, if we are to lay the basis of an abiding friendship. It is the characteristic petition, therefore, of the disciple of Christ that he should

pray, "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done."

Can we who wish to be witnesses for Christ not make it plain that coming into the Christian life is even so simple and yet so deep a matter as coming into the best friendships anywhere? We are children of the heavenly Father, who has so revealed himself to us as to call out our completest trust, who gives himself to us as he asks that we should give ourselves to him, and who seeks from us that we should identify our interests and lives with his. In laying this plain basis of friendship with God, we are proceeding precisely as in all the other deepest relations of life, and the steps are not more obscure in the one case than in the other.

LETTER VIII

THE CONDITIONS OF DEEPENING ACQUAINTANCE WITH GOD



Letter Eight

THE CONDITIONS OF DEEPENING ACQUAINTANCE WITH GOD

WE are trying together, let us not forget, to find our way into the deepest truths of the Christian faith and life. We are trying to see them so deeply and yet so simply that we may be able not only fully to grasp them for ourselves, but also to be able to make them clear and effective to others. I have not known how to do this with you without using lines of thought which I have followed elsewhere in my writing. But this you will pardon. I have had very little to say about the technical

terms of theology, and yet, if you will review the ground now covered, you will see that we have been dealing with some of the most fundamental conceptions of the Christian faith.

I have not felt that it was possible for me to bring you into the very heart of these greatest of all truths without constant reference to Christ and to his all-inclusive teaching of the Father. We have really simply been asking for the inevitable implications of his thought of God as Father and men as children, when we have conceived the Christian life as in its very essence a friendship, and thus have been asking what the foundation to be laid in such a friendship must be. I am to ask you to go with me still a little further along this same line, get-

ting all the light that it is possible for our best human friendships to throw upon this personal relation to God. That is, how are we to go forward to build upon the basis already noted — mutual self-revelation and answering trust, mutual self-surrender, and some deep community of interests? This is to ask how it is that God is redeeming us to himself.

1. *An Unconscious Growth.* First, let us make it clear to ourselves that *any high friendship is much more an unconscious growth than it is a work of conscious arrangement.* It would not be wise for two friends to say to each other, Go to, now, let us have a great friendship. Great friendships are not so brought about. Our main concern, therefore, in our relation to God should be a careful

fulfilment of the conditions upon which a friendship may naturally deepen; then we may count with certainty upon the result. Neither in the human nor in the divine relations is it usually possible for a great friendship to result from mere conscious effort. The most important part, usually, in a friendship is the result of unconscious growth. And it would mean much for the normality and the joy of our Christian lives, if we could keep this simple thought in mind.

2. *No Continuous Emotion.* In any friendship, also, we may well remember that while we do well to assure ourselves of the meaning of the friendship, *we are not to expect continuous emotion.* There are, no doubt, great differences here with different dispositions. Those who

find themselves naturally emotional in other things may expect a larger degree of emotion in the religious life than belongs to others. But in no case is warm emotion to be expected as a continuous experience. This is indicated, too, by the character of the very natures involved in such unbroken high emotions. Neither our physical nor mental constitutions permit the constant strain. To attempt this in any personal relation is simply to invite failure. The deliberate seeking of great experiences for their own sake is always unwise. The best cannot so come. No acquaintance, moreover, human or divine, will stand constant introspection, and we cannot, therefore, wisely subject our religious life to such persistent self-examination as is certain to follow if emotional expe-

rience is made the main aim and test. Under such examination we do not see our own states of mind in their normal condition. They inevitably change under inspection. The one course of wisdom for us is simply to go steadily forward in faithful fulfilment of the natural conditions of a deepening friendship, and so to be sure of the results. We can be certain that God desires to receive us as his children, and in trust in his love we need only press faithfully on in fulfilling our part in the deepening of this filial relation.

3. *Association. The main factor in a deepening acquaintance is association.* All directions for the deepening of our friendship with God may be almost summed up in this single suggestion. An acquaintance is not the product of certain rules,

but the unconscious result of much association. One wakes up with a kind of surprise to find how much a friendship means to him. And in our relation to God this is still the main factor. It is only through constant association with God that we grow into his life. And so Christ assures us that the Spirit has been given to "be with you for ever"; that we are to "abide" in him and he in us; that we are to seek such unity with Christ as he himself has with the Father. The greatest of all the conditions, therefore, of a deepening acquaintance with God, is much association with him; giving Christ opportunity with us by attention, by thought, by living much in the atmosphere of his life, by finding it second nature to think his thoughts, to

feel his feelings, and to will his purposes.

4. *Time.* Time is necessary for growth into anything of really great value. We need not be surprised, therefore, to find that a main condition of growing into a deepening friendship with God must be the giving of some time. *No acquaintance can become deep without time given.* Any love will grow cold to which no time is given. This is the practical way in which we do give ourselves to our friends. One has only to look over his own experience to see that he has allowed certain friendships quite to drift out of his life simply because a little time was not expended to keep them alive.

It is just here that there lies the prime significance of the taking of daily time for Bible study and for

prayer. These are no magical conditions. In recognizing their necessity, we are simply fulfilling the same conditions which hold for any true friendship. Just as it is a matter of serious importance in the family that the members of the household should be often together, so we need to put ourselves in the presence of God in the use of his Word and of prayer, that he may have opportunity to share with us his own life, and to bring us into some real unity with him.

And besides these special daily times of association with God, we may well remember, also, *the significance of occasional longer times.* One knows how certain friendships have deepened for him immensely because the two friends have been shut up to each other for a considerable

time, perhaps in travel, so that they have been almost obliged to get down beneath the mere surface of their lives, and through the longer association, to come to share something of the inmost and best that has been given them. So in our relation to God, an occasional taking of a much longer time than is usual for the daily Bible study and prayer, may yield large results. For myself, I am sure that nothing has been worth so much to me in my own life as the times when I have been able to stay face to face with God in the Word for three or four hours at a stretch, taking opportunity really to get down into the great truths and to get some glimpse of the great revelations of God.

5. *The importance for a growing Christian life of the regular use of the*

Bible is so great that it deserves special emphasis. We are to remember that decision for the Christian life means the opening of the life to God, and that its continuance, consequently, depends on keeping the life so open to this new, greatest, transforming, personal relation. And keeping the life so open depends, in its turn, above all, on regular Bible study. He who keeps such study steadily going is practically certain to maintain his Christian life and to grow intelligently in it. He who does not is pretty certain finally to fail.

The reasons for this central importance of the Scripture can be seen from different points of view. For if we start from the idea of environment, we must remember that that part of our environment

makes us to which we attend. And probably the greatest way in which we can be sure to put ourselves within reach of a strong spiritual environment is through regular Bible study. Moreover, the mind readily recurs to its habitual objects of thought. And it is these habitual objects which are certain to dominate the life. If we are habitually turning, thus, to the great moral and spiritual resources of the Scripture, we have the right to count on a deepening spiritual life.

Or, if we look at the matter from the point of view of personal association, the universal law to be recognized is that we become like those with whom we constantly are, to whom we voluntarily surrender ourselves, and who give themselves unreservedly to us. Now the Scrip-

ture offers us, in preeminent degree, just such association. It allows us to come into close personal contact with God-touched men, — those to whom and through whom God has most effectively spoken. We have here the opportunity of sharing their visions, and so of being introduced, through these greatest seers, into some of the deeps of the spiritual world. Here, too, in the Scripture is the record of the preeminent meetings of God with men, into which it is possible for us to enter.

And the Scripture gives us, as does nothing else, the possibility of laying that foundation of a true personal relation with God of which we have spoken. For it is a record of his dealings with men, and so of such a revelation of him as makes possible our answering trust. It

calls out again and again our self-surrender in particulars. And it brings us in its atmosphere into some community of interest with God in Christ. As we thus give time to our Bible study, we are entering into the transforming association with God, which must be the main factor in deepening our acquaintance with him; and to come really to know God is life eternal.

In my next letter I want to call your attention to some other important conditions of deepening still further this friendship with God.

LETTER IX

THE CONDITIONS OF DEEPENING ACQUAINTANCE WITH GOD

(Continued)

Letter Nine

THE CONDITIONS OF DEEPENING ACQUAINTANCE WITH GOD

(Continued)

IN this letter I wish to call your attention to a single great fundamental means, if our acquaintance with God is to deepen as it ought. The principle — and to it I wish to devote the entire letter — is simply this: that if our relation to God is to grow in significance, it needs *expression.* It is one of the central propositions of modern psychology, that in body and mind we are made for action, for the expression in some active way of every bodily and mental state. No idea or feeling or

purpose can come to its full significance for any of us without expression. The general psychological law here is, that *that which is not expressed dies.* Let us apply just this law, now, with some real care to our religious life. For if the law is a true one, we cannot expect full reality in our religious life if we fail to give careful heed to this principle of expression. If, therefore, one wishes his religious life to mean all possible to him, he must express it in significant action. Otherwise, it is likely to become either the sentimentality of mere passive emotion, or only the dogmatic holding of certain opinions. The need of expression is a perpetual one everywhere. So in any friendship, if you would have your love mean much, you must in various ways give it expression.

1. *Expression by Word.* Many of us are naturally reserved, and are chary and half ashamed to express the best in us; and repression in any personal relation is likely to grow on one apace. Any friendship needs, at times at least, expression in word. It is not only well for others that they should know occasionally the pleasure we find in their companionship, it is important for ourselves. And our relation to Christ certainly will not be to us what it ought unless we take some pains to say, in different, simple, and perhaps largely private ways, what Christ means to us. We are not to underestimate here the value of simple witness. Christ's program for the conquest of the world was through a campaign of simple testimony from heart to heart of what Christ meant. Many

of our closest personal relations suffer from lack of this simple expression in word. And we need not think it strange that the same principle should hold in the religious life. Does any one know how much Christ really means to you, not simply from some half formal expression in prayer-meeting, but from the speaking out of your heart in close and intimate fellowship with another? Are you taking pains that others shall know? Do you really mean to be able, here, to speak with authority from first-hand knowledge out of your own experience? You can only bear witness, but you are to bear witness of what Christ really, honestly is to you. How else shall others find him much to them? It is so preeminently that the kingdom of God must grow. And it is

so, also, that your own sense of personal relation to God will grow.

2. *Seeking to Please in Little Things.* And friendship needs as well not only the witness of the word, but that expression that is found in seeking to please one's friend in little things. Perhaps the best test of a true love is to be found just here. For few of us are likely to fail in the *great* demands that our personal relations make upon us. But we are much more likely to fail in the thousand and one little ways in which the real spirit of our relation to another is tested. The chief mark of obedience is not shown at the great crises, but is found rather in that sensitiveness of conscience that makes us careful to do what is well pleasing to God, even in the slighter things. The cup of cold

water given in the name of a disciple, Christ assures us, is taken as given directly to him. And if one finds, in a personal relation, that he is always having his own way, however smoothly and graciously that may seem to be occurring, he may well suspect that he is guilty of real selfishness. And this same spirit is likely to pursue him in that most fundamental relation — the relation in which he stands to God in Jesus Christ. This expression of one's love in little things requires time, attention, and thoughtfulness. If we are really to minister in Christ's name, and to minister unto others as unto Christ, we shall hardly succeed without the sympathy that is free from preoccupation and able to put itself in the other's place. A reverent love for another shows itself

in trifles of manner. And our love to Christ will best show itself in similar care in the trifles of our daily life. We make no sacrifice so great as that which manifests itself in what we count the small things of daily living.

> "More careful not to serve Thee much,
> But please Thee perfectly."

3. *By Gratitude.* And true love needs especially that expression which finds its outlet in gratitude. Gratitude has rare power to bring men together. It is hardly possible for any one to say honestly to another how much what the other has said or done or been, means to him, without a distinct strengthening of the ties between the two lives. The honest expression of gratitude brings men together as few things do. On

the other hand, thoughtless ingratitude chills greatly any friendship. Even where there is no desire to cherish resentment, the person to whom the gratitude is due cannot avoid a feeling of real hurt. There are few things harder to bear, perhaps, in our daily life with others than to feel that the sacrifices that have cost us most have been all unappreciated and taken practically as mere matters of course. Do we always appreciate the loneliness of those who stand nearest us? And are we not too chary of the word of appreciation and of praise that might mean much more than we think? It is not well in any personal relation that too much should be perpetually taken for granted. And so in our relation to God, we shall find few things so kindling our hearts and so

helping to make real the relation in which we stand to God, as to go carefully over the manifold occasions for thanksgiving, and to take pains to express our gratitude to the heavenly Father for the mercies of the daily life. There are very few hearts that will not respond to a careful review of the occasions for thanksgiving. "In everything give thanks," the Apostle writes to the Thessalonians, "for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus to you-ward." And this single injunction strikes much closer to the very heart of our religious life than we often think.

4. *By Sharing Burdens.* How close are the companionships which grow up in the mutual sharing of trial and struggle and danger! This, I suppose, is what makes so significant the companionship of

soldiers who have been long together in successive campaigns. The burdens that we share inevitably tend to draw our souls together. And it is just at this point that people sometimes make serious mistakes — parents in trying to spare their children, the husband the wife, the friend his friend. For, to refuse to let your close friend into your inner struggle and burden means often simply keeping him out of the deepest part of your life, treating him like a child. This is not to spare him so much as to defraud him. And it is one of the highest honors conferred upon us by Christ that he does not deal with us in this way. Rather, he calls us into the sharing of his own suffering; and he says to his immediate disciples, "Ye are they that have continued with me in my

temptations." From this point of view, too, therefore, we may well say with Peter, "Insomuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings, rejoice." That two souls should commit themselves with all the power of completest self-devotion in sacrifice to the same great cause, is to insure essential closeness of fellowship. And it is this fellowship that Christ offers us with himself. And just as it is often only in the times of peculiar burden and trial that the best and greatest and deepest in our friends reveals itself, so, too, it must often be that only at such times shall we taste the full meaning of the heavenly Father's love and care. And in that mutualness which belongs to every great friendship, Christ not only shares his great purposes and sacrifices with us,

but he asks us, in like manner, to bring to him all our burdens, to find them lightened for us in the thought of his sympathy and uplift.

5. *By Sacrifice.* And this leads us to see distinctly that no love can mean most to us for which we have not genuinely sacrificed. A love that has cost us nothing is not likely to mean much in the beginning, nor to grow to much in the end. It is true that where the love is great and strong, the sacrifice will be a joy, rather than a sorrow. But some deep and significant giving of oneself there must be in any personal relation that is to greatly count. Sacrifices increase love. Our hearts are where our treasure is. Where we have invested little, we shall care little. And one need not be surprised to find that his Christian life

means little to him, if he has not been willing to render to Christ the sacrifice of time, of thought, of attention, of giving, of sacrifice that should really mean something in helping to bring to its goal that great kingdom of God that is to satisfy the longing heart of our Lord. In our selfishness it is sometimes difficult for us to understand it; but the whole religion of Christ is based on the fundamental principle that our highest joy can be found only in this positive giving of ourselves unto men and unto God in redemptive service, so entering into the very heart of Christ's own life and joy and peace.

Such expression of our personal friendship with God, by the witnessing word, by seeking to please in little things, by gratitude, by sharing burdens, by sacrifice, will as certainly

deepen our friendship with God as these same things deepen our friendship with men, and both results are as certain as the existence of law in the world at all. May I hope that this thought will help to bring more unity and simplicity into both your thinking and living?

LETTER X

THE CONDITIONS OF DEEPENING ACQUAINTANCE WITH GOD

(Continued)

Letter Ten

THE CONDITIONS OF DEEPENING ACQUAINTANCE WITH GOD

(Continued)

I SHALL not quite have brought out for you what seems to me to be the full force of this thought of the Christian life as a friendship with God, without calling your attention, in this letter, to three or four further considerations which affect any growing friendship.

1. *The Slight Causes of Difficulty.* And, first, there are few cautions, probably, that the man who would be a true friend needs more to take to heart than the caution to be on his guard against *slight*

occasions of estrangement. In no personal relation that concerns us deeply can we safely harbor or dwell on the small points of controversy. Our only safety lies in clearing them up at once. Great estrangements grow from them. Both in our human and our divine relations we are more in danger of getting away in the little than in the great things. The deeper the friendship one has with another the more sensitive one is to these little differences. One soon learns to interpret the slightest indications of face or gesture or movement.

And so in our relation to God, our progress is measured in part by our sensitiveness as to the little things. We need, for our highest safety as well as for our joy, unclouded communion with the Father. Sensitive obedience in the

littles is both the proof of our love and God's way of guidance, and the direct road to more intimate acquaintance with God. On the other hand, disobedience in the little things constantly mars the relation.

In all our close friendships it is also worth emphasis that *we are not to look to and constantly dwell on little differences and faults in our friends.* This faultfinding and complaining spirit is quite sufficient to spoil any love, even the deepest. This spirit kept up in relation to a child may easily end in "rooted antipathy" on his part; the bonds of sympathy are ruptured, and a spirit of entire discouragement results. By fixing your attention on defects, you can ruin a friendship that, on the other hand, is quite capable of becoming your chief joy. And a similar cau-

tion is needed not less in our relation to God. It is quite possible to pick out of the allotment that has providentially come to us the encouraging or the discouraging things, and so thankfully to rejoice, on the one hand, or bitterly to complain, on the other. The complaining spirit is often felt not to be a serious matter, but one has only to think how fatal are its results in other personal relations to see how certainly it must disturb any deep sense of trust and love and gratitude in our relation to God. This complaining spirit cuts the very root of a possible deepening friendship with God, and is to be recognized, therefore, in all its seriousness as one of the deadliest enemies of a true and joyful and peaceful Christian life. It is not a small sin nor a small danger.

2. *Sacred Respect for the Personality of Your Friend.* Perhaps the subtlest of all the conditions for deepening any true and worthy friendship is to be found in sacred respect for the personality of your friend. Where that is fundamentally lacking no great and worthy friendship can possibly result. And many a friendship has been greatly damaged by such a lack. There are limitations to all intimacies with others, and even in the closest friendships we are not to presume, we are not to pry, we are not to scold. We are not to take away the possibility of decision or choice, not even in the case of a child. We are not to insist on the explanation of every mood. Every soul must in much be alone, and ought to be. One only degrades his friendships, I have

felt compelled often to say, when he measures them by the number of privacies that he rides over roughshod.

And in our relation to God we are not to forget, upon his part, how marvelously he respects our freedom, and how, though he is Lord of all, he stands only without the door of our hearts to knock for admittance. God does not arbitrarily obtrude or interfere. So truly does he respect our personality that he does not step in, even occasionally, to "set things right." He has put us in no play world, but in a world in which our choice and our personality are fully respected.

And, upon our own part, this spirit of reverence which is so necessary in our relation to our friends

cannot be less necessary in our relation to God. No friend can be to us what he might be without reverence both on his part and on ours. Still less can God give us his complete gift, if our reverence does not answer to his reverential treatment of us. Reverence is, indeed, not a formal matter of any kind of conduct or of respect for places and things; and a deep, inner reverence may quite conceivably exist where the outward conduct might seem to the careless observer irreverent. But if it is in any degree true, as it has been frequently charged of late, that the present generation is growing in irreverence, let us make it quite clear to ourselves that we are, in just that degree, striking at the very root of all true personal relations to God or

men. The attitude of presumption, of prying, of scolding, of dictation must be far removed from our relation to God. There is a false boldness, as Luther remarked, which talks to God as a man might talk to a "cobbler's lad." It is not for us to demand the time or the manner of God's revelation. "The secret of the Lord is with them that fear him." And if even our smallest human spirit has its holy of holies that may not be inconsiderately violated, how much more must deep reverence characterize all our thought of God! We are to "work out our own salvation with fear and trembling; *for* it is God who worketh in us both to will and to work, for his good pleasure." It was not by accident that the great prayer that was to characterize the disciples of

Christ in all ages began with the word, "Hallowed."

3. *Be Real.* Once more, no friendship is safe into which the element of pretense is introduced. We are to be real only and always. There are to be no false assertions, and no forced feeling. We are not to start or continue on a false basis. While, as I have said, we are not to question our love or that of another on slight occasions, we are still to be sure that we are scrupulously honest; that we say what we mean, and only what we mean; that the witness we bear to Christ, though it be a modest witness, is just so far as it goes a genuinely honest one. In our prayers, too, we must learn how to tell the truth, not to take upon our lips expressions even of the Scriptures, which we cannot truth-

fully transfer to our own experience. We are not even to repeat, out of our previous lives, expressions not now real. We are to make sure, that is, throughout, that we do not introduce that element of pretense that always means finally a deadly sense of unreality. He who will not be real saps thereby all reality in his relation with God as well as in his relation with men.

4. *You May Deepen Your Acquaintance with God through Seeing What Others Have Received from Him.* If one thinks of a great, many-sided nature like that of Aristotle, or Leibnitz, or Luther, or Shakespeare, he will realize at once that different sides of the nature will be revealed to different persons. And one comes into the completest understanding of such a nature only

through glimpses of table-talk and letters and home life, and from knowing his intimate friends. In exactly the same way we can come to know God, even approximately, in his fulness only as we take account not only of our own personal experience, but supplement it with the largeness of the experience of others as well. We need in all things constantly the correction of others. Our own view is necessarily partial, and has its own inevitable narrow limitations. Much of the best that God has for us must come through others. And even in this deepest matter of our personal relation to God, we are not made independent one of another. God has some special, peculiar message to speak through each soul; and he may speak as really to us through

another's life, as in his own direct communion with us. This recognition of the constant need we all have of Christian fellowship emphasizes, from another point of view, thus, the importance of the Bible, in which it may be said we are able to put ourselves in touch with the most intimate friends of God. We can here see what God has meant to others, and so supplement and broaden and deepen our own view. In this constant and wise use of fellowship with others, and in that objective expression of our religious life in service, of which I earlier spoke, you will be saved from the brooding subjectivity that might otherwise beset your Christian life. The thought of our Christian life as a personal relation with God does not shut us up to ourselves. The

relation to God is so absolute and infinite that we need and can bring to it all the help of the supplementary experience of others.

In insisting thus at length, as I have in these last four letters, upon the fundamental significance of the conception of the Christian life as the beginning and deepening of a friendship with God, I have simply been trying to place before you, in terms of the personal life and experience you already know, those great, fundamental Christian doctrines which have been so long discussed under the names "conversion," "regeneration," "sanctification," "baptism of the Spirit," and "faith and works." I have intentionally tried to strip the discussion of all these more or less technical terms, because I fear they

have often served to hide rather than to reveal the real truth as it is in Christ. And I have tried, rather, to get back to what seems to me to be the central conception of Christ and of the New Testament, that the Christian life is simply that of a growing child of the heavenly Father, and to ask you to see, in some detail, just what that great central thought of Christ meant. I hope the attempt has not been without value for you, and I hope still more that through you it may bring something more of light and blessing into the lives of others. I am simply trying to hand on to you that one great fundamental thought that has, perhaps, meant more than any other to me.

LETTER XI

THE FUNDAMENTAL TEMPTATIONS

Letter Eleven

THE FUNDAMENTAL TEMPTATIONS

WHEN one turns from the conception of the Christian life as a deepening personal relation of a child with the heavenly Father, to ask still more practically just what this conception of Christ means in living, he will find himself confronting, just as Christ did, certain great fundamental temptations that underlie, I think, all the temptations of life. And I have thought I could not serve you better in this letter than by trying to make clear just these always-present temptations.

In his tremendous sense of sonship, of mission, and of power, Christ

took to his temptations a threefold consciousness. The elements in this threefold consciousness, of power, of mission, and of sonship, were for Christ a divine call, to which he made answer: I must be worthy of the power granted; I must be a consistent founder of a spiritual kingdom; I must prove a true son. And one cannot be a consistent founder of a spiritual kingdom, it is to be noted, except upon three conditions: constant spiritual sensitiveness, undying faith in men, and refusal to seek relief in change of circumstances rather than in change of self.

The temptations which are thus seen to underlie all the temptations of Christ, and the temptations of all men, are: the temptation to abuse of trust, the temptation to fall below

one's highest spiritual sensitiveness, the temptation to seek relief in change of circumstances rather than in change of self, the temptation to disbelief in men, the temptation to distrust of God. Just these, I judge, are the temptations which confront every man in all that threatens his moral and spiritual life. For the elements of Christ's consciousness are in only less degree the elements of the consciousness of us all.

1. *The Temptation to Abuse of Trust.* The temptation which Christ faced, to use the power, given him for the sake of the kingdom, for personal relief, was fundamentally a temptation to abuse of his trust. He was forced to meet the question, Why should he not use his power for his own relief — why should he not turn the stones into

bread? Why, again, should he not use his power in a marvelous exhibition of trust in God that would remove prejudice, get him a hearing, and win deep and respectful attention from the first? Why, once more, might he not use his power to establish his rule — his own righteous rule — even by force, forthwith? Christ's answer to each form of the temptation is simply the insistence that his power is given him for the sake of the kingdom, not for his own relief, whether in greater personal comfort, in increased popularity, or in impatient use of force. My power, he seems with quiet energy to say, is no personal perquisite of my own; it must be held sacredly for the great ends for which it was given.

And everywhere to-day the same

temptation presses upon us all — the ever-present, fundamental temptation to the abuse of our trusts. In the use of the positions in which we have been placed, of the power involved, of the money we handle, of the opportunities presented — in all alike the power of this temptation is felt. It is hardly possible to take up a paper without seeing some illustration of the abuse of trust. Our generation needs a great revival of the simple sense of fidelity to our trusts. No one of us is likely to cultivate too sensitive a conscience concerning any power that has come into his possession. Let him ask himself how his power has come? for what end it was given? whether he is using it simply and solely for that end, or is making it, rather, a means for his own personal gain?

2. *The Temptation to Fall Below One's Highest Spiritual Sensitiveness.* And the very illustrations which the life of the present day affords make it unmistakably clear that a large part of the gigantic abuse of trust is due to the simple lack of a fine sense of honor. It is exactly this lack that has made such abuse of trust possible. To see truly here and to take the perfectly honorable course, requires a delicate sensitiveness of conscience, undoubted singleness of vision. This was the only way of deliverance for Christ himself. He needed the clearest spiritual insight to see the meaning of his trust. The pathway both of the highest individual progress and of the largest social service requires that we should be steadily sensitive to the very best vision that God has given, and to remain per-

sistently true to it, and so to get the larger and the higher vision. All true life, it seems not too much to say, is included in this. The inmost secret of life is that one should be persistently at his best. On the other hand, the onset of evil most to be feared is not that of open and brazen sin, but the subtle, gradual deterioration that, like an insidious disease, saps the very foundation of all possible character. Like "the damnation of Theron Ware," in Harold Frederic's powerful story of that name, it comes on us as a thief in the night, while we still think of ourselves as sleek and prosperous. Plainly, a man has started on a descent, the extent of which, in its deep darkness, no eye can foresee, who consents to live in anything below his highest spiritual sensitive-

ness. The temptation to do so is one of those fundamental temptations which carries with it a whole flood of others.

3. *The Temptation to Seek Relief in Change of Circumstances.* When Christ was tempted to use the power given him for the founding of a spiritual kingdom for his own personal relief, whether in greater comfort, or popularity, or sway, he was, in all three forms of the temptation alike, tempted to seek relief in change of circumstances, rather than in change of self, by proving adequate to the circumstances. He could not evade the real struggle involved in the setting up of such a kingdom, and his victory must be inner, not outer. God means me to rule, he might well say, yet not to establish my personal

power, but a spiritual rule. There is no escape, for either Christ or his disciple, except by changing those inner conditions which lie within our own power.

The temptation to seek relief in change of circumstances rather than in change of self is perhaps peculiarly strong for Americans. The rapidity with which, in this newer country, great changes of fortune often take place, and the comparative ease with which a change of employment is made, constantly tempt the American who does not find himself satisfied to seek to change his conditions, rather than to adjust himself to his situation and prove himself superior to it.

In any hard situation there are always two conceivable ways of deliverance: the one, that of simple

escape from the circumstances; the other, that of rising superior to the circumstances. No man who means to be a man can even wish always to take the easy way out. God's best and most gracious answer to our prayer for deliverance, as in Paul's case, may often be not the removal of the "thorn in the flesh," but the "sufficient grace." And if, in any given case, one finds it possible to take the easy way, he has still to remember that, so far as character or any other high attainment is concerned, he has all his fight still to make. From that real battle of life he may find no respite; for the true sources of character, of influence, and of happiness alike, in this world of ours, are inner, not outer, — the riches of a cultured mind, the potent calm of a contented, self-controlled,

and lowly spirit, the wealth of a genuine love. These no change of circumstances can give. And they are ours all the more, if we have won them against the trend of circumstances. Like Leonard, in Mrs. Ewing's "The Story of a Short Life," we must learn to be "happy in our lot" — to withstand the temptation to seek relief in change of circumstances rather than in change of self.

4. *The Temptation to Disbelief in Men.* From the point of view of his work, the wilderness experience of Christ involved a further constant and fundamental temptation — the temptation to disbelief in men. For all three forms of Christ's temptation urge the advisability of beginning with men with a lower appeal — the appeal to their bodily needs,

to their love of the marvelous, to their sense of fear. And in repudiating wholly the primary claim of any of these lower appeals, Christ affirms his deep faith in men. And the tempter's argument is still often pressed. No real kingdom of God, many of our modern theories seem to affirm, can be built on men. You can trust no heroic appeal, no appeal to love.

Contrast, now, Christ's indomitable faith in men. He knows well that you cannot essentially traduce men without traducing God. The suspicious attitude is one always at war with love. Disbelief in men, the cynical spirit, is fatal alike to character, to influence, and to happiness, — to character, for you cannot greatly love him in whose greatness you have no real

belief; to influence, for you cannot strongly move those in whom your faith is small; to happiness, because in this narrowing, belittling judgment of men you have necessarily cut yourself off from the joy of worthy association. Suspicion ties your hands. It takes the heart out of your work, and the heart out of your joy. You must believe in men.

5. *The Temptation to Distrust of God.* When one believes that there is no possibility of using effectively with men purely moral and spiritual forces, he disbelieves not only in men, but he shows an even deeper distrust of their Creator, God. This spirit, carried to its logical extent, means nothing short of atheism and the denial of all ideals. Even a few men with such thorough-

going distrust of spiritual forces are able to diffuse a deadly atmosphere. The man who means with Christ to be a consistent builder of a spiritual kingdom must be willing to use the highest means and trust the results with God. We were not meant to be self-sufficient even as to men; still less as to God. We need men, we need God; we are all but fragments else. Life becomes possible, joyful, and triumphant in proportion to the depth of our faith in God.

And we all have a special right to urge with the young that they stand with Christ from the beginning of their lives against these constant and fundamental temptations that make a particularly strong appeal to the inexperienced. Christ seems to me to have shared with us

all this sacred story of his temptations, just because he knew that we all had the same fight to make. We can do nothing better for men than to help them to the spirit that can rise above these fundamental temptations; and that is exactly the spirit of a true son of the Father.

LETTER XII

THE SUPREME CLAIMS OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE UPON THOUGHTFUL MEN

Letter Twelve

THE SUPREME CLAIMS OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE UPON THOUGHTFUL MEN

IN this last letter which I am to write to you concerning the great fundamental Christian truths, let me ask you to see, both for yourselves and for others, in a kind of summary way, and in the light of all our previous discussion, the supreme claims of the Christian life upon thoughtful men. You will not be in doubt as to what I mean by the Christian life. It is the life of the man who intends to be first and foremost a disciple of Jesus Christ,

to live the loving life of a true child of the heavenly Father. And I mean by the thoughtful man the man who is in earnest to see things in their true proportions, for whom the great is really great, and for whom the little takes its appropriate smaller place. You can hardly find the inspiration you most need for your work as Christian witnesses, unless you are thoroughly convinced of the supremacy of the claims of the life you are urging upon others. And the lines of thought already covered ought to make clear to you how great the Christian life is in its present contribution, and how immeasurable is its outlook upon the future. Let us try to make clear to ourselves, then, the supreme claims of the Christian life, looking at the matter from different points of view, and

putting it in different forms, not all mutually exclusive.

1. And, first, *the Christian life is the supreme prudence*, using the word not in any low sense of mere prudential selfishness, but in the larger sense of that practical wisdom that takes the long look ahead, that takes in the whole of life, age and death and eternity. In Professor James' words, "In all ages the man whose determinations are swayed by reference to the most distant ends has been held to possess the highest intelligence. The tramp who lives from hour to hour; the Bohemian whose engagements are from day to day; the bachelor who builds but for a single life; the father who acts for another generation; the patriot who thinks of a whole community and many generations; and, finally, the

philosopher and saint whose cares are for humanity and for eternity, — these range themselves in an unbroken hierarchy." The Christian life says with Browning's Rabbi:

"Grow old along with me!
The best is yet to be,
The last of life, for which the first was made:
Our times are in His hand
Who saith, 'A whole I planned,
Youth shows but half; trust God: see all, nor be afraid!'"

The life of a disciple of Christ confronts a man, thus, with the constant question: Are you building on such lines as promise perpetual growth into the best things, even on into the eternities; or, is your idea of life such that you must look back after a very few years with vain regret, saying, with the title of a poor play, "When we were twenty"? For myself, I

do not see how it is possible for a man who really means to think, not to wish to take this long look ahead; to be sure that he is building something better than greater barns; that the plan of his life is so adjusted to the great on-working forces of the universe, so bent on doing the will of God, that it is certain to "abide forever." And because the Christian life takes clearly into its vision the *whole* of life and destiny, it makes a supreme claim upon the thoughtful man.

2. In the second place, *the Christian life is the one complete life that can face all the facts of life without flinching and with genuine hope.* It should be particularly characteristic of the thoughtful man that he wishes to see all the facts, to face them fully, and to face them just as they are. There

is the fact of our *double nature*, with both its heavenly and its earthly appeal. There is the fateful gift of *will*, with its power of choice either for God or against God. There is the fact of *responsibility*, of the constant influence that we are exerting one over another whether we will or not. There is the terrible fact of *sin*, an abiding fact, and if one's face is not in the right direction, a growing fact. And there is the fact of *death*, the one certain event that awaits every man. I quite sympathize with the emphasis of the present generation upon right living as the best possible preparation for dying; and yet I cannot think it a wholly wise reaction that allows a man to leave out of account this great and certain fact. For myself, I want to be sure that all that God may have

for me in that experience of death I am prepared to take in.

"I would hate that death bandaged my eyes and forbore
And bade me creep past."

And there is the fact of *accountability* to God, to which Daniel Webster once solemnly bore testimony that it was the most important thought that ever occupied his mind. "So then each one of us shall give account of himself to God." And there is the fact of the *future life*, in which at least this is certain, that every one of us must live with himself. Now, all these facts, alike dark and difficult, inspiring and transforming, the Christian life seems to me to be able fully to face, as no other. It gives the disciple of Christ such a plan for his life as enables him to be sure that the hold of the godlike in

his double nature shall strengthen with his years; that his will shall will in line with the eternal and righteous purposes of God; that he need not shrink from the thought of responsibility for others, nor even lose hope in the face of sin, nor be in bondage to the fear of death, nor doubt that it will be possible for him to face his final accountability to God in the same filial spirit in which he faces daily the Father's will, nor question that the sharing of God's life of self-sacrificing love here is inevitably of the very quality of the eternal life that is to be. How supreme a claim does that life make upon the thoughtful man, which is able with assurance and hope to face all these facts of life!

3. The Christian life, further, makes a supreme claim upon the

thoughtful man because it *involves the one great world-organization for ideal aims, for ends of character.* The Church of Christ, as the author of *Ecce Homo* long ago pointed out, is in very truth "the Moral University of the world — not merely the greatest, but the only great School of Virtue existing." Have you thought what it really means for the ideal interests of the world that there should be such an organization as the Church of Christ, with its little groups of disciples, with whatever imperfections, still gathered everywhere, not for selfish interests, but to bear witness in the community to the highest ideals, and to keep clear before men the vision of God and the spiritual world? There is no other organization or institution, outside the family, that can be com-

pared for a moment with the Church in profound moral significance, and in hope for the world. If the dynamic problem of life is, as Professor Everett used to say at Harvard, the problem of throwing one's life in with the great world movements, then surely no man who wishes to make his life count for the most can wisely stand outside of some participation in the Church of Christ. We boast that our generation has come to see more clearly than any preceding, that we are members one of another. It would seem to be the first inference from this social consciousness that we should not fail to see its truth for the highest interests of life. We are members one of another, not only for economic and political ends, but even more for the highest spiritual ends. And I do not

see how any thoughtful man can feel justified in standing as a mere onlooker, when he is face to face with this one great world-organization for ideal aims, the Church of Christ.

4. Again, *the Christian life stands for the mightiest of all convictions*, and in this, too, makes a supreme claim upon the thoughtful man. A man's real strength for all possible accomplishment, other things being equal, we are never to forget, depends on his convictions. One of the great dangers of the educated man, just because he has learned to look at things from many points of view, is a kind of over-sophistication, that means that he has lost the sense of emphasis and selection among the facts of life, and therefore lost the great fundamental convictions that must underlie the highest living. If

this has come to be true of a man, he is pretty certain to be worth positively less to the world after his university training than before. Now, the Christian life, in its very spirit, stands assuredly for the mightiest of all convictions possible to men: for *the love of God, and the life of love.* In these great convictions root all others that are of prime importance to men, and these convictions carry with them the highest courage and the most unfaltering faith. No theory of life that has ever been proposed to men is able here to outbid the Christian life.

5. *The Christian life involves, too, the supreme and all-inclusive surrender,* and thereby again makes a supreme claim upon every man who is willing to think. Even our ordinary psychology and ethical philosophy are

saying to-day that life is a paradox, that victory comes through self-surrender, that the measure of life is not its income, but its outgo, and that it is as one gives himself in the varied relations of life that he truly finds himself. It belongs, therefore, to the very drift of our times that we should recognize that not exclusion but inclusion enlarges life, and that the largest life can come only to the man who gives himself with increasing breadth and depth in family, community, nation, the kingdom of God. Now, the Christian life brings to its inevitable climax this attitude of surrender, for it calls for that supreme and all-inclusive surrender that carries with it all that is best in all the lower stages; for it is surrender to the will of God. It says, therefore, with Christ, "I am come

down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me." And beyond this the law of surrender cannot go, and in this one vital commitment of the life is included all and more than all that psychology and ethical philosophy contend for in the lower stages of the surrendered life. The Christian life stands here, therefore, for the richness and largeness of the "abundant life," over against the "abiding alone" that marks the life that refuses to give itself.

6. It is to say the same thing in different words, perhaps, when, catching up the central thought of our preceding studies, I say that the Christian life makes also a supreme claim upon the thoughtful man because it *stands for the relation which gives reality and meaning and value to*

all other personal relations. We have seen in detail how surely, if life is the fulfilment of relations, the relation to God is not simply one relation among others, but that one great, all-commanding relation which, truly fulfilled, carries with it a true fulfilment of every other. The anxiety which the Christian father, or mother, has that his child may become a disciple of Christ, arises from his conviction that in very fact the relation to God is that one essential relation which, itself set right, inevitably sets all others right. The thoughtful man, therefore, feels just at this point, too, the supreme claim upon him of the Christian life.

7. Or, if we look at the matter from a slightly different point of view, we may say, in the light of the most careful investigation of man's

nature, that life has, above all, its great sources in friendship and work, and that the supreme claim, therefore, of the Christian life upon the thoughtful man, is to be seen precisely in this, that in the acquaintance with God in the Spirit, it *offers the one ideal association for both character and happiness, and, at the same time, calls to the highest work*, the sharing of God's own redeeming activity, in his giving of himself to men. Just because the Christian life meets here, in the completest degree in which it is possible for us to conceive, *the ideal conditions of the richest life*, it makes here a supreme claim upon any mind that is willing to think long enough to see what those ideal conditions are. When God calls us to acquaintance with himself and to share in his own great work, he

makes it possible for us to give our lives to eternal interests and to the highest conceivable interests. Blessed is the man who has found his work and the great Companion! Heaven itself has nothing greater to offer. We can hardly doubt, therefore, as I have elsewhere said, that "the two great centers of the life beyond must be association and work; though we may not know the precise forms that these will take, nor how greatly both may deepen beyond our present conception. Steadily deepening personal relations, rooted in the one absolutely satisfying relation to God in Christ, there must be; and work, in which one may lose himself with joy, because it is God's work. This, at least, the future will contain."

8. All this means, further, that the Christian life makes a supreme

claim upon the thoughtful man because it *gives assurance of the highest hopes*. It contains within itself the vision of the ideal, the best our hearts can ask or imagine, and exceeding abundantly beyond all that we ask or think. At least occasional experiences in the personal relations of life may give one a hint of the riches here in store. To know something of the deep undercurrent of even one true friendship, with its contribution of calm and peace and hope and joy, is to get a suggestion of what this deepening life in the acquaintance and work of God may mean. Christ makes us able to believe in the immortal life, and in the endless growth into the life and work of love — into the deeper acquaintance with the inexhaustible God. And we build our hopes of all the future

life upon nothing so surely as upon Christ's own spirit and word. What other theory of life is able to give such assurance?

9. And all these claims of the Christian life upon thinking men are true, because, back of all, *the Christian life means simply the full recognition of the one great world-fact and person, Jesus Christ.* Above all, therefore, it is because the Christian life calls to the discipleship of the supremest personality of history; because it brings us at once face to face with the vision of the matchless riches of that life; because, therefore, it gives the completest assurance for character and influence and happiness, and so opens up the way to the boundless growth and achievement of the eternal future; — it is because of all this that beyond doubt it

is in Christ that the Christian life makes its supreme and all-inclusive claim.

With this survey of the supreme claims of the Christian life, and with its outlook into the eternal future, we have come to the end of the conference we have undertaken together. I almost feel as if I must have some personal acquaintance with you. In any case, I have shared with you my best. May I hope that something of the greatness of the calling with which you are called may have been brought home to you in our study together of these great themes of the Christian life? If I have succeeded in accomplishing at all what I originally set out to do, I shall have brought home to you, I trust, in some measure, the double conviction both of the great-

ness and of the simplicity of the faith in Christ. I shall have helped you, I hope, to a little deeper sense of the meaning of your life as disciples of Christ, and of the joy of his service. May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing.

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